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Liddell Hart and the Weight of History

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Robert McNamara, who recently revealed his own long-standing moral ambivalence about deterrent strategies. Equally striking is the omission of the uproar provoked by the U.S. Roman Catholic Bishops' 1983 pastoral letter (condemning on traditional moral grounds the present U.S. strategy for deterrence), which has been widely and closely studied at several of the senior war colleges.

For all the volume's shortcomings, however, several essays, make it useful. For example, John Yoder, a pacifist theologian, points incisively to the universality of often unacknowledged moral commitments in all major political-military choices. Yoder pleads for more candid admission of the ethical premises of policy decisions than is normally recognized by popular theories of "Realism" in foreign policy. Another piece seems to suggest that the application of Clausewitz' theory to present doctrines of nuclear war would reveal that the latter are open to serious questioning.

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Mearsheimer, John J. *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell Univ., 1988. 234pp. \$24.95

Captain Sir Basil Liddell Hart was a prolific military writer until his death in 1970. He also, supposedly, significantly influenced the German generals in World War II and, later,

the Israeli military leaders. One writes "supposedly" since this book, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History*, by Professor John J. Mearsheimer challenges these views.

Mearsheimer disputes the conventional idea that the Germans obtained the blitzkrieg concept from Liddell Hart's works: "I find no basis for the widespread claim that Liddell Hart had marked influence on the development of the thinking about the blitzkrieg in Germany during the interwar years and that the German offensive of May 1940 was essentially a case of his disciples putting his theories into practice."

Mearsheimer makes much of a short passage of praise to Liddell Hart in General Heinz Guderian's *Panzer Leader* and produces evidence that Liddell Hart wrote the paragraph with the approval of Guderian for the English edition. It was undoubtedly wrong for Liddell Hart to have done so, but this in itself does not blemish the idea that Liddell Hart actually *did* influence Guderian. Mearsheimer unconvincingly suggests that each had much to gain by praising the other.

There is one important point overlooked by Mearsheimer. Guderian, dismissed in the winter of 1941 and later reinstated as Inspector-General of Armored Troops, flew to Hitler's headquarters for a conference on 9 March 1943. In *Panzer Leader*, under the heading "Conference Notes," is the sentence, "Read out article by Liddell Hart—on organization of armored forces, past and present."

Why, at his first important conference with Hitler after being reinstated, would Guderian read a paper by a man who had no influence on him? What does Mearsheimer have to say about this famous sentence? Nothing—not one word! One suspects that this omission would leave readers with uneasy feelings about this book.

The most serious of Mearsheimer's errors lies in his confusion of policy and strategy. Liddell Hart had long been an advocate of a British sea power strategy rather than a Continental commitment. Mearsheimer finds this hard to understand. He believes that British strategy, which he often calls policy, was correct in both world wars in striving for a decisive victory over Germany. Apparently he does not accept Clausewitz' idea that war should be an instrument of policy.

British policy vis-à-vis Europe had been to maintain a balance of power

which entailed, as in World War I, a grand strategy of preventing the defeat of France and Russia. The ideal instrument for this role was not a large British army, but the Royal Navy. The pursuit of a decisive victory over the Central Powers would undermine British political aims. When in fact Britain did place a large army on the Western Front, she trapped herself into supporting Franco-Russian ambitions—which was not a balance of power. True, Britain “won” the war, as Mearsheimer states, but a military victory is only the means to an end, a political aim. It is like the old medical joke: the operation was a success, but the patient died. If we accept Clausewitz, that the political aspect is the most important point, then, in this sense, Britain lost World War I.

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It is entirely plausible that the Nobel Peace Prize should have been awarded to the designers of the first SLBM (submarine-launched ballistic missile) systems, for in being so well hidden under the seas, this kind of weapon has made war much less likely during these years and, further, let each side relax somewhat more in the knowledge that such war was unlikely.

George H. Quester
Armed Forces & Society
Winter 1987, p. 199